

Rev Cyril Paul

President of the IRO

10th December 2003

(Prepared by Leela Ramdeen for IRO meeting on 11th December)

Dear Rev Paul,

Re: IRO's response to Crime

Further to our conversation, I write to make a plea to the IRO through you, as President of the Organisation, that the IRO organise a public event(s) on the issue of Crime in T&T. I have spoken to His Grace, Archbishop Edward J. Gilbert, who knows that I will be preparing this note to you as you requested.

People are crying out for some kind of action from religious groups. None of us have all the answers to the crime and violence that confront us, but a public event could

- a) be an expression of solidarity by people of goodwill in our country that we reject Crime/violence and wish to build a culture of peace;
- b) demonstrate to victims of crime and their families that the wider community care about them and will stand shoulder to shoulder with them in their wish for justice and peace;
- c) send a message to those who violate the rights of others that enough is enough; we will not stand by idly while a few individuals in our community distress the entire nation;
- d) raise the awareness of our Government that the public is not satisfied with action taken so far to deal with the causes and effects of crime;
- e) act as a sign of hope to our people. Without hope some of our people may despair.

Now, more than ever, as we approach the holiday season, we need to let the public know that we plan to take action. What kind of action we take can be discussed by the IRO. The following are a few examples of what can be done. The IRO could organise one or more multi-faith activities e.g.:

- a) a National Multi-Faith Day of Prayer after Christmas;
- b) a National Multi-Faith March/motorcade ending in a multi-faith service at, e.g., the Stadium in POS;
- c) marches; vigils; day of prayer – all to take place on the same day at the same time around the country so that those who can't travel to one venue can meet in their own communities to pray or march for the reduction of crime and violence in our society.
- d) pastoral letters to be sent to members of all faith communities by respective religious leaders at Christmas time or in the New Year.

Conferences may not attract the crowds we need. People are frightened and/or angry and they need to be able to meet publicly to vent their feelings, to make suggestions about the way forward and so on.

There are many other ideas floating around and I dare say that members of the IRO may have their own thoughts on the issue. The main thing is to decide on what can/should be done collaboratively by all members of the IRO and their faith communities, allocate areas of responsibility to ensure that things don't fall between stools; and advertise the event(s) using the media, places of worship and so on. Basically, we need to mobilise the entire community to support whatever is planned.

You know the saying: All it takes for evil to prevail is for good men and women to do nothing. The majority of citizens in T&T are good people. We can only build a culture of peace if each of us is prepared to pray and to take action – walking with the 2 feet of justice!

I think the time for action is NOW. Your meeting will be held on International Human Rights Day. No religious group has been spared in the onslaught of crime and violence. The human rights of all groups have been violated in our country by a handful of people. It is appropriate, therefore, for each member of the IRO to commit himself to join others on the IRO in this venture.

I pray that in your collective wisdom you will be inspired by the teachings of your respective faiths to decide on a particular course of action that will lead to a visible sign that people of faith live in T&T and are concerned to build the common good and to promote human dignity and human rights.

There are no short-term answers to the problem. We need to address distributive justice and look at the impact of the gross disparity in wealth between citizens in T&T. Our young people need not only financial capital to get a start in life but social and psychological 'capital' i.e. support systems to promote their self-esteem/self-image; to motivate them and promote their attitudinal development.

These are not short-term measures. We need medium to long-term strategies. It is imperative that we engage corporate citizens to plough back profits into the structuring of human development programmes as part of our intervention strategy.

We should also seek to bridle the energy among the population that is asking for punitive measures to be taken as a solution to crime. Empirical evidence, in terms of the number of people incarcerated, demonstrates that even imprisonment is not a strong deterrent. The high rate of recidivism nearly 60% clearly shows that imprisonment, as an end in itself is not working. There must be the political will to establish broad-based rehabilitation programmes which should be mandatory in the prison system.

We are all children of our creator; all members of the one human family. Therefore, our strategies should not be based on an “us and them” principle. This approach will further isolate those who are engaged in criminal activity. Our approach has to be one based on an attempt to bring back to the fold those who have strayed. Inclusivity vs social exclusion is an issue that has to be addressed if we are going to put a brake on the spiralling crime.

Our educational institutions must play a more pivotal role in promoting moral and spiritual development among our youth. All the foregoing thoughts are encompassed in the Restorative Justice paradigm that is being embraced the world over as a way forward to dealing with crime, not as solely the breaking of the law but as destruction of community relationships. We are seeing that not only are laws being broken but families and entire communities are being traumatised.

We have to challenge each other that in addition to keeping ourselves secure and safe, which are short-term measures, we need to look at long-term measures which would reverse the propensity for individuals to engage in criminal activity.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Leela Ramdeen

Episcopal Delegate/Chair of CCSJ

cc Archbishop Edward J. Gilbert